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Elite CIA Unit To Be Abolished

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In a decision with major implications for the national security, the Nixon administration has ordered a radical overhaul of the Central Intelligence Agency's method of analyzing and evaluating foreign intelligence.

According to authoritative sources in the intelligence community, William E. Colby, the newly installed CIA director, has reached a "firm decision" to abolish the Office of National Estimates, the elite, 30-man office that since 1959 has prepared the top secret and definitive National Intelligence Estimates; the papers on which a succession of presidents has based crucial policy decisions.

John W. Huizenga, the agency's Director of National Estimates and, as chairman of the Board of National Estimates chief of the CIA's intelligence analysts, resigned from the agency at the end of June. He will not be replaced.

THE decision to abolish the Office of National Estimates has not been announced. It is certain to provoke a reaction in Congress, which has already been stirred by revelations of the Watergate case to take a closer look at CIA operations than ever before.

The National Intelligence Estimates, generally referred to as NIEs, probably helped the CIA regain some public trust in recent years. As revealed by the Pentagon Papers, CIA estimates of the Vietnam war set forth misleading facts, when the Pentagon was still claiming a military victory was possible.

Early in the 1960s, when the administration of President John F. Kennedy was in power, the CIA began to produce a document that ran counter to White House wishes during the bitter political debate over the anti-ballistic missile.

Partly because of these controversies, NIEs came to be distrusted and ignored in the latter part of the Johnson administration and through almost the whole Nixon period.

President Nixon is known to have become personally disenchanted with the CIA performance during the ABM controversy, and it is an open secret that his national security adviser, Henry A. Kissinger, has tended to deride and disregard NIEs since he joined the administration.

The decision to abolish the Office of National Estimates is certain to revive speculation that the CIA is under attack from the administration for having failed to produce the kind of intelligence estimates that would support its policies.

White House dissatisfaction with the CIA is generally believed by sources close to the agency and to the administration to have been a major factor in the resignation of Richard M. Helms as CIA director shortly after Nixon's re-election last year.

Colby's move to eliminate the office that has been responsible for the most refined product of the government's multi-billion dollar intelligence gathering effort shows that he clearly intends to carry out the sweeping changes in the agency undertaken by his immediate predecessor as director, James R. Schlesinger.

BEFORE Schlesinger moved over to the Pentagon as Defense secretary during the administration's Watergate shakedown last May, he had ordered a sweeping cutback in personnel. It was done in the name of efficiency, but older agency professionals denounced it as "brutal," and the purge swept from high-ranking posts in the CIA virtually

every officer there who had been close to Helms.

At the same time, Schlesinger brought into the agency, Maj. Gen. Daniel O. Graham, a controversial Pentagon intelligence analyst who has openly advocated stripping the CIA of its authority to analyze military strategic intelligence and giving that function to the Defense Department.

At this time, Graham was given a managerial function, but observers thought it likely that he would some day move into the intelligence estimating field.

It is not clear how much of the decision to abolish the Office of National Estimates is Schlesinger's and how much Colby's.

It is also not clear what Colby has in mind to replace the Office of National Estimates. Sources close to the director insist that there is no plan to make the NIEs directly subservient to the policy-makers in the White House.

THE Office of National Estimates was first organized early in the Korean War, when the American intelligence apparatus was still in its formative stage.

Its first director, Harvard historian William Langer, set up the dual structure that still exists: The 10-man Board of National Estimates and the 20-man National Estimates staff, which carried out the research and collated reports from intelligence gathering channels in the CIA and elsewhere in the government.

The estimates, about 50 a year, were prepared almost as though they were scholarly dissertations on a variety of subjects requested by the National Security Council. They were a consensus of the whole U.S. intelligence community, with dissents carefully registered in footnotes, but the 10-man

board had responsibility for their preparation.

Under a later chairman, Sherman Kent, the board and its staff developed the system of carefully graded verbal measures of certainty that still characterizes NIEs. "Apparent" is the most tentative and "almost certain" the most definite short of a flat assertion of fact. The grades in between are "possible," "suggested" and "probable."

This verbal precision was apparently infuriating to recent administrations. The White House, even before the Schlesinger reorganization of November 1971, sent word it wanted "facts, not opinions," according to one published account.

WHEN the 1971 plan was announced, it was reported as aiming for an intelligence product better tailored to the wants of its "consumers" in the White House. And when Schlesinger became CIA director, he made it known that NIEs would be more useful if they were "four pages instead of 40."

According to one anecdote current in circles close to the agency, Schlesinger confronted his first meeting with the Board of National Estimates with the observation: "I understand this is like a gentleman's club. Well, I want you to understand that I am no gentleman."

The appointment of Colby, a career professional in the CIA, brought sighs of relief at all levels of the agency. But the abolition of the Office of National Estimates, its elite board and its staff, suggests the sighs may have been premature.